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Business Opportunity: Bottled Water Outsell Alcohol, Soft Drinks In Harare

By [Dana Sanchez](#)

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Bottled water in Zimbabwe. Photo: newsday

Demand for bottled water has led to new business opportunities in Harare, where poor quality municipal water prompted entrepreneurs to collect empty plastic bottles from trash cans and sidewalks, refill and sell them, according to a ReutersFoundation report in [AllAfrica](#).

An estimated 300,000 liters of water is sold daily in Harare, population 1.6 million — a lot of it in recycled bottles. Zimbabwe's Finance Minister, Patrick Chinamasa, blames imports, saying they have reached "crazy" proportions.

But there's no evidence that the bottles in question are imported.

Refilling bottles with dirty water is hurting the image of companies like his, said Arnold Gokwe, a director for a local water bottling company, Still Waters Packaging.

"Fly-by-night sellers fill bottles with rain water and stick our brand across their bottles. This spoils our reputation," he said in an interview, ThomsonReuters reported.

Bottled water now outsells alcohol and soft drinks in some neighborhoods, with rich and poor paying \$1.50 per bottle.

In November, First Lady Grace Mugabe distributed bottled water with her face on the labels at a "Meet the People" rally, [Newsday](#) reported. While the water was welcome, it was an admission of failure. The municipal drinking water is unclean, a Newsday editorial writer said. "Grace and her party should work on improving water supply to Mbare and other suburbs of Harare."



Harare City Council Health Director Prosper Chonzi announced seven suspected cases of typhoid in late January, [VOAZimbabwe](#) reported. Waterborne diseases have been common in Zimbabwe due to unsafe drinking water and poor hygiene.

“Municipal water is smelly. Often we see visible dirty particles floating,” said Precious Shumba, chairwoman of the Harare Residents’ Trust, the largest civic pressure group in the city, in a Thomson Reuters Foundation interview.

The drought has exacerbated Harare’s water issues. Providing clean water has been a problem for about 10 years. The problem has been worsened by an exodus of qualified water engineers, a cash-strapped municipal government and power cuts. The city produces only about 40 percent of the water it needs, Shumba said.

People who drink water out of the tap are breaking out in rashes or getting typhoid, health authorities say. About half of the city’s water leaks out of broken distribution pipes on its way to homes, water engineers say. Illegal connections are also a problem.

Sheila Dezha, 40, a widow, collects empty plastic bottles from bins and sidewalks, scrubs them clean and refills them with well water.

She refrigerates the bottles overnight, then sells them for \$1.50 to passersby near malls and restaurants, or to drivers at traffic lights.

“Dirty municipal drinking water means big profits for me,” said Dezha, who lives in Epworth, one of Harare’s poorest areas. “On a good day I can sell 100 bottles of water.”

At first her neighbors said Dezha’s business was “shameful and deceitful,” she said. But “I can afford to put my two children through secondary school. Now neighbours borrow money from me. On weekends I go around the community teaching women how to clean dirty bottles and sell fresh water.”

In the past few years, Zimbabwe has reached out to the Netherlands for expertise in water management, [TheHerald](#) reported. Zimbabwean water experts and government officials planned a trade mission funded by the Netherlands in late January to scout for investment in the water sector.

The focus of the trade mission was to learn about water chemicals, chemical dosing equipment and rehabilitation of water infrastructure.

Not all the bottled water for sale on Zimbabwean streets is safe, according to ThomsonReuters.

Health problems have risen in the city because of dirty tap water and refilled bottles, said Jimmy Sabelo, an infectious disease doctor who runs the private Everjoy Medical Centre.

“Often I am treating over 10 patients with vomiting, abdominal pains and dysentery. Some of it is related to water issues, especially patients from the poorest suburbs like Mbare, east of the city,” he said.

In Harare shops, shelves are full of bottles of drinking water that bear the faces of popular Pentecostal Christian spiritual leaders who attract up to 10,000 worshippers at their meetings.

“The prophet’s drinking water is safe by faith. We don’t need stupid tests to prove it!” one shop owner said in an interview, ThomsonReuters reported.

School teachers, security guards and ice cream vendors can be found selling water on the side.

“I stock and hide (30 bottles of) water in my office every day,” said Rarami, a secondary school teacher in the city who asked that his surname not be used. “I sell to thirsty students for \$1.10 a (bottle). It’s a marvellous secret profit.”

Supermarkets are advertising safe drinking water treated by reverse osmosis.

Bottled water is outselling alcohol sales three-to-one, said Naye Beta, a warehouse manager at Pick n Pay supermarket, one of the Zimbabwe’s biggest retailers.

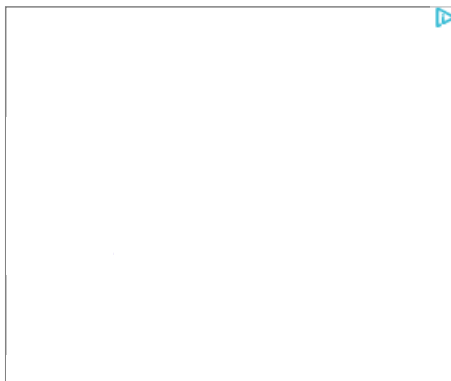
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